

#177 MARGARET OLSEN: STATION HOSPITAL SCHOFIELD

Chris Conybeare (CC): This is an oral history interview with Margaret Olsen. It's December 4, 1986. We're at the Sheraton Waikiki in Honolulu. It's about one PM. Margaret lives at Junction City, Kansas. My name is Chris Conybeare, and I'm being assisted by Mark Tanaka-Sanders.

Margaret, we'll start this the way we have with just everyone, and that is can you tell me your name and rank on December 7, 1941?

Margaret Olsen (M0): Lieutenant, Second Lieutenant Ada Margaret Olsen, Army nurse corps.

CC: And where were you stationed?

M0: Schofield Barracks, the station hospital.

CC: As a nurse, what kind of -- was it any specialty that you were involved in, or what was your job situation?

M0: I was working on the obstetrical ward.

CC: Oh.

(M0 chuckles)

CC: And maybe you could tell us a little bit about that morning, before the attack, when did you first know that there was something unusual going on?

M0: I was bathing babies and all of a sudden there was a loud explosion, and I thought the ammunition dump had gone up. It was real loud. And then there was another one, and then I heard planes dog fighting, and I thought they were having maneuvers. And then one of the corpsmen came over and said, "Stay away from the windows and doors. The Japs are bombing Pearl Harbor."

And I said, "Oh, we're all going to be killed."

And our head nurse said, "No, we're not. If the women in England can take bombing, you can too. Get to work."

CC: How about the day before? What had your routine been, and . . .

M0: The same.

CC: So how, had you been up late, or . . .

M0: I was up late, oh, until -- it must have been about ten o'clock. We had a late delivery and I had to stay until it was done. We had a twelve pound baby boy.

CC: And then, how had -- what was the morning routine? How would you wake up in the mornings? What was the . . .

M0: Oh, the bugler would wake us up. It's the, let's see, Nineteenth Infantry. I'd hear the bugler. And they were right next door to the hospital.

And then their man would come out and play in their quadrangle, and then I'd listen to that, and then I'd get dressed, and have breakfast, and go to work.

CC: What were you planning to do that day?

M0: I was going on a picnic on the beach.

CC: So after work in the morning, you'd go Did you have any duty assignment?

M0: We had half days off on Sunday, and I was going to get off at one and have the rest of the day off for our picnic.

CC: And who were you going on the picnic with?

M0: My boyfriend and a bunch of his friends.

CC: And what was his name?

M0: Lieutenant Gordon Sterling.

CC: Okay, so the attack started and you heard the explosions and did you see any aircraft or anything?

M0: Well, they -- after I was so upset, they sent me to the pharmacy to get some drugs. We were out of some drugs. And when I got there, there were litters all up and down the floor with injured and they were marking their heads with a red "M," meaning they had given 'em a shot of morphine for pain and for shock. And as I was coming back, I . . . our buildings are connected with a ramp, and I walked outside in order to get back to where my station was, and the Japs come over again, and they flew real low, and you could see the rising sun, and you could see the pilot.

CC: You were that close?

M0: Yeah.

CC: What did that scene remind you of, that you saw with those stretchers?

M0: "Gone With the Wind."

CC: What . . .

M0: The battle scene in Atlanta, you know, that movie had just come out couple years before, and they had all the injured lying on the street, because our soil is red here, and in Georgia it's red. And just the same.

CC: And that was your . . .

M0: That's what I thought of.

CC: What were the nature of the wounds? Who were the wounded that were there? Do you know where they'd come from?

M0: They were from Wheeler Field. They had bombed one of their -- what do you call -- where they're eating, and they ran out when the first bomb fell. They were having breakfast, and they just mowed 'em down.

CC: What kinds of things did you start doing as a nurse? What kinds of duties?

M0: Then, after I got back with my medicine, I was sent to the surgical ward and we were setting up cots down on the floor and sending everybody back to duties that was able, and the ones that stayed, they got up and helped us. They were a great deal of help, these boys that weren't ready for duty yet.

CC: And what kinds of wounds did you encounter?

M0: Abdominal -- most of 'em were abdominal.

CC: Oh, from shrapnel, or . . .

M0: Mm-hm.

CC: What was going through your What was, how were you feeling at the point? What was going through your mind?

M0: I was scared. I don't think I was thinking.

CC: Yeah.

M0: Because I never heard anything so loud before in my life.

CC: Did --- when you were at work, how long did you actually -- how long did the shift last at tending to the wounded?

M0: It lasted until nine o'clock, and they sent us home to get some sleep. And we had flashlights that we had covered with blue paper, so you couldn't see 'em from the air, to get home, but I loaned mine to a girl that didn't have one, to get on duty, as I was on my way home and it took me a long time to feel my way in the dark.

CC: Were you still apprehensive at that time?

M0: No, I was just mad. Ruined my day.

CC: What kind of thoughts were going through your head? You say you were angry, what made you the maddest?

M0: I just don't know. I was just mad 'cause they upset Christmas, it upset everything for us.

CC: Did the --- when the attack stopped, were you aware of the change in the -- I mean, were you aware of the planes being gone or was there at any time during the morning that you felt that you were safe, or were you just too busy to think?

M0: Oh, too busy.

CC: Yeah. What --- do you remember any of the other nurses that you were with, or what did you talk about it at all, or did you know what was going? Did anybody really inform you what was going on at that time?

MO: That --- no, just the corps men would hear things and would talk, that's all. We really didn't hear anything.

CC: Just had a job to do?

MO: Uh-huh. Then we went to dinner. Our cook was Japanese. He had a son that was in the Japanese Navy, and he was good to us. And but he cooked us boiled potatoes and boiled chicken, and that's tasteless. I still can't stand it. But our chief nurse made us eat it because she said it'd be your last meal.

CC: What happened to your boyfriend?

MO: He was shot down over Kaneohe Bay.

CC: So you never saw him again?

MO: Mm-mm. They never recovered his body.

CC: Do you know how that happened? Did you ever hear what happened to him?

MO: Just what's been in the 'gram. He saw 'em go over, so he just got in the plane and went up.

CC: And . . . that's all that they know?

MO: He was shot once and then he saw another plane, and then went after it and he didn't see the fellow on his tail that got him and went down in flames.

CC: What was it like that night and the next couple of days?

MO: Oh. Well, I had a sick headache and everybody giving me sleeping pills. It's a wonder they didn't kill me because I had never taken sleeping pills before. And we got up once during the night for an air raid warning, and we went to the basement -- it was all concrete -- and sat down there until the all clear blew.

CC: So things were pretty tense?

MO: Yeah, mm-hm.

CC: Let's go back a little bit. Why did -- how did you get to Hawaii in the first place? What got you into the nurse corps?

MO: When I finished school, I -- that was depression days and I got a job at Fort Riley, as a civilian nurse. And then they put pressure on me to join the corps, because we were going to be drafted because we were going to get into war. That was their tale. And it was a disgrace to be drafted.

CC: So you decided to enlist?

M0: Yeah. They, they only had 600 army nurses then, and there was an opening in there.

CC: When did you learn you were coming to Hawaii?

M0: Some girl -- I was at Fitzsimmons then -- and some girl canceled out. She didn't want to go and they talked me into going.

CC: What was it like here when you first came? Was this your first big adventure away from home?

M0: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

CC: What kinds of things did you do to relax and what, just what was it like?

M0: Oh, we'd swim and we rode horseback up into the mountains and my horse got shot that day. His name was Red Bird and we'd go up there amongst the ferns and ZOOTS. And we played tennis. We'd get up before we go on duty and we play tennis. And we'd go to the beach at Haleiwa. And we went dancing real often.

CC: What kinds of places would you go dancing? What . . .

M0: At the officers' club.

CC: And were they live music, or . . .

M0: Yeah.

CC: What kind of music? What was fun then?

M0: Swing and sway, and boogie woogie. (M0 chuckles)

CC: Yeah. What was your favorite music, do you remember?

M0: Glenn Miller. I liked his music.

CC: Any particular song?

M0: I liked all of 'em.

CC: Yeah. So a good evening might consist of dancing at the officers' club?

M0: And dinner.

CC: And what . . .

M0: They had it Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. Then on Friday night was the Nineteenth Hole at Wheeler Field. And it was informal. And then on Sunday night they had their formal dinner dance. So we were busy on our hours off.

CC: But you never thought that -- did you ever think that it really was going to be a war? I mean, did you ever . . .

MO: Not Japanese. I thought it was going to be Germans, 'cause coming over on -- I come over on *MARIPOSA*, and I kept looking for subs.

CC: So you people were at least . . .

MO: Oh yes.

CC: . . . concerned.

MO: Mm-hm.

CC: And . . .

MO: We had gas mask drill and they would throw gas out and the minute you smelled it, then you put your gas masks on.

CC: So this was all happening beforehand?

MO: Yeah. Mm-hm.

CC: What about after the attack? Did you spend the war in Hawaii, or what was the rest of your duty?

MO: I stayed there and worked. And then I came back in '44 and I went to Fitzsimmons again and worked with the prisoners of war in the -- they had TB. And then I went down to Temple, Texas. It was the amputation center the government had. And then I went on up to Hot Springs, Arkansas, Army and Navy hospital and worked, and then I got out.

CC: As a medical person, you get to see the worst part of war.

MO: Yes sir.

CC: How did . . .

MO: The cleaning up. (MO chuckles)

CC: How did that make you feel, to see all those young lives and . . .

MO: You feel awful sorry for 'em.

CC: Yeah. Did you . . .

MO: But . . .

CC: Go ahead.

MO: But they have improved on medicine now. When, during the Vietnam War, I went back out to Fort Riley and worked as a civilian nurse, and worked with the wounded. And they saved a lot of limbs with bone graft, skin graft and antibiotics. They saved a lot of . . .

CC: Things they couldn't do then.

MO: Yeah. Mm-hm.

CC: You had a chance to work with prisoners of war. Were they Japanese prisoners of war?

MO: They were Japanese, Germans, and Italians.

CC: What was that like? What were they like?

MO: Geneva treaty, Geneva treaty.

CC: For . . .

MO: They tell you that's all they could say, Geneva treaty.

CC: How did you feel having that kind of contact with them? Was . . .

MO: It didn't bother me. It didn't bother me.

CC: What was your attitude towards them?

MO: I was kind.

CC: Your view was your job was to heal people? (Pause) How about now, forty-five years later, when you think back to that Sunday, how do you feel about it all? Do you have any special thought that comes to mind?

MO: No. They don't need war. It doesn't do any good.

CC: No.

MO: It really doesn't.

CC: Don't think it really solves things?

MO: Uh-uh. No. Makes a mess for the people to clean up. And it's a waste of lives and money.

CC: Do you --- when you come to these reunions, what do you look forward to at the reunion?

MO: Just seeing everybody having a good time. Everybody is your friend.

CC: Yeah, you've known each other for . . .

MO: Uh-huh.

CC: I guess when you share something together, it makes it kind of special, you know.

MO: And they always have a nice banquet. It's always lovely.

CC: So it's a chance to just relax.

MO: Mm-hm.

CC: Well, I really appreciate your talking to us. You have anything you want to ask?

(Conversation off-mike.)

M0: Thank you. Thank you.

CC: That was great, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW